COVENANT, PART II: QUESTIONABLE BLESSING
Genesis 17:1-8
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In Joseph Heller's irreverent novel, God Knows, an old and very human King David looks back over his life which has been a kind of running argument with God, ever since his child died in infancy. Reflecting on what it has meant to be God's Covenant people, he complains:

> "Some promised land. The honey was there, but the milk we brought in with our goats. To people in California, God gives a magnificent coastline, a movie industry and Beverly Hills. To us He gives sand. To Cannes He gives a plush film festival. We get the PLO. Our winters are rainy. Our summers are hot. To people who don't know how to wind a wristwatch He gives underground oceans of oil. To us He gives hernia, heartburn, and anti-semitism...
>
> "Don't ever get the idea He made things easy for me. Life as one of God's chosen has never been a bed of roses."

Being part of God's chosen people has not always been much of a privilege. In fact, sometimes it has seemed like a burden. "Why, if God loves us, are we being defeatd in battle, enslaved in Egypt, exiled in Babylon, occupied by the Romans, driven from our home and chased, hounded, persecuted through the centuries, crowded into ghettos, blamed for everything that goes wrong, pushed into concentration camps and gas chambers by self-proclaimed savior of Christian German culture, the brunt of innocent-sounding but vicious ethnic jokes acceptable at every polite cocktail party and still unwelcome in the most exclusive clubs in town?"

To be God's chosen people has been a questionable blessing. Christians share - should share - all of that, particularly the questionable part. We are brothers and sisters with Jews: part of one family and when anti-semitism appears in our midst, we need to be very clear that it tarnishes us and it is for us. There is no such thing as Christian anti-semitism. Abraham is our father, Sarah our mother. The Covenant is ours; the questionable blessing, our theological problem too.

The story is at the beginning of the book. Genesis sets out to tell about one God, Jahweh, and his relationship with the creation - through a nation, a people, chosen for that purpose. God establishes a covenant, an arrangement, a contract. The material in Genesis was compiled in the sixth century B.C. when the people were in Babylonian exile. It was written to tell them who they were and to help them maintain their identity in an alien culture.

First creation: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and creation gone dispoiled, broken. Then Noah, first recipient of the promise, first to know that God cares, suffers, grieves, and loves his people like a parent. Then that wonderful Tower of Babel, symptomatic of the continuing fault within creation between God's intent and the way things are going. And then, interspersed with column after column of "begats" to remind the reader that we are talking about human history here and not some mystical eastern mythology, the saga presents Abraham and Sarah.

With Abraham and Sarah, relatives of Noah, God is going to try again. Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggeman writes:

> "The purpose of the call is to fashion an alternative community in creation gone awry...It is the hope of God that in this new family all human history can be brought into the unity and harmony of the one who calls."
> (Interpretation, Vol. I, Genesis, p. 105)

The God of creation addresses old Abraham and Sarah and repeats the promise: there will be a covenant between them. Abraham and Sarah will have an heir - a prospect so unlikely Sarah laughed out loud when she heard it. They will have the land, also an improbable prospect for an elderly couple with a few tents and several goats to their name. And most mysterious and tantalizing of all - they will have a God.

> "I will establish my covenant between me and you
> to be God to you and your descendents after you."

Historically - theologically the text is defining a fundamental relationship between God and the world and at the same time defining the source of identity, hope, meaning and purpose for God's people - which includes us. Notice that God promises - essentially and fundamentally to be God. And the appropriate response for Abraham and Sarah is, first, to trust that God will be as good as his word on the descendents and land promises, and then to respond by moving, by letting go of all they have, by abandoning all the certainties, and comforts they have accumulated, and literally casting their lot with their God. Abraham and Sarah respond in faith to God, and from that point on being God's covenant partner has been, at best exciting, demanding - at worst a very questionable blessing in any terms the world understands.

The issues in Genesis are astonishingly contemporary. It is not easy for us to let go of the idea, the hope, that there are tangible rewards which come with being religious. As a matter of fact there was a time not long ago in this country that economic success in the marketplace was defined as a reward for godliness and piety. The idea is not dead. A feature in the business supplement of the Citizen Journal last week quoted a highly successful RV dealer to the effect that religion is the secret to his success. There is enormous popularity to religion that promises tangible, rewards for piety, preferably financial, although psychological or physical rewards are acceptable as well. A new phenomenon in the entertainment industry is something called Christian Soft Rock: according to one music critic, "It often sounds like an endless cycle of television advertisements that extol the virtues of religion as if it were some kind of trendy merchandise: 'Leave all your cares behind,' she sings." (see Context, Martin Marty, 3/1/85, p. 4)

A recent news release covered the announcment by Jim Bakker, evangelist and president of the PTL Television Network, that his organization is building a multi-million dollar luxury hotel...to lure people to become Christians. He explains: "Jesus said that we were to be fishers of men. And with some of the bait that we have used in the church - I call it 'dill pickle religion' - I've never seen anyone catch a fish with a dill pickle and sourpuss religion.

We're using better bait to win people to Jesus Christ." Included in the "world class" hotel will be a swimming pool, sauna, and hot water spa just off the lobby, and four floors of $70 a night rooms which feature remote control television and custom-made furniture." (The Christian Century, 2/20/85, p. 178)

The matter of what blessings we should be receiving as a reward for being God's people is never very far away. And throughout history there have always been many willing to treat religious commitment as an investment in one's future security. The trouble with that is that it runs head-on into the witness of the Bible. In the Bible, belonging to God can be very risky business. It has absolutely nothing to do with one's successes in the world. It can be dangerous for rich and poor, powerful and weak alike. Now it is also mistaken to deduce that one cannot be faithful to God and successful in whatever one is doing. Integrity, fairness, compassion, I believe, are wise, long term virtues. But to equate faithfulness with succeeding in real estate, or winning basketball games, simply ignores the Biblical witness, popular as it is. The crucified Christ who is the Christian model of faithfulness will not make it as a metaphor for success in the world.

At an even more serious level theologians have forever pondered the relationship of suffering to the promises of God's loving covenant. If God loves us, why is there suffering? Why premature death, birth defects, and famine in Ethiopia? Why did David and Bathesheba's child die? Why, in God's name, Dachau, Buchenwald? Rabbi Richard Rubenstein, in a powerful series of essays published in 1970 under the title, After Auschwitz, suggested that the God is Dead answer was the only one that made sense. He put into words what every thoughtful and honest person thinks occasionally: "A God who tolerates the suffering of even one innocent child is either infinitely cruel or hopelessly indifferent." (p. 87)

What the Genesis stories are proclaiming of course is the precise opposite. What the Covenant means to the covenant people, and through them to the whole wide world, is that there is a living God who, in spite of the evil in history, the tragic mistakes along the way, is a dynamic part of the story. The Covenant promise is that in spite of the suffering through which you and I may be called to walk - in fact right in the midst of it - there is one who will be God to us.

What difference does it make? What does it mean to have a God? For Abraham and Sarah it meant cutting themselves loose from the accumulated certainties of their old age and trusting God, not all those crtainties - the goats and cattle and tents and gold under the mattress, and their reputation in the community - not all that, but God - to give them a future. So, Professor Hans Kung, suggests in his monumental, Does God Exist?, the first demand on the believer is to say "no" to all the other gods. "One-god faith," he wrote, "dethrones the divine world powers in favor of the one, true God..." All the gods before whom moderns bow,...the great God Mammon, the great God Sex, the great God Power, the great God Science, the great God Nation, the great God Party. The one-god faith is utterly opposed to any quasi-religion. It throws down all false gods." (p. 619)

The difference it makes is that you and I, to be in covenant with God, must say "no" to other sources of meaning, hope, identity, and salvation, and that is very tough going. It means, at a very deep and personal level, where we feel more than we think, that the essence of my life, the most profound life in me, is not tied to winning, preaching great sermons, selling real estate, building great skyscrapers, writing best sellers, or even raising wonderful children, but in loving God and being as honestly faithful as I can to the God who created me.

Jesus did not shy away from the strength of that. "If anyone would come after me, take up a cross and follow...Whoever loses life for my sake will save it." That "Lordly call" is precisely what Abraham and Sarah heard back on the edge of history: a call to radical abandonment and radical trust in God. It is what stunned the disciples of Jesus: stunned them as they heard it and argued it through: and stunned them as they discovered that to trust, to follow, to allow life to be lived for Jesus Christ was suddenly and beautifully to know what God intended for human life. They called it their salvation.

What does it mean to have a God? In terms of worldly success it may be a questionable blessing, but to have this one, who will be "God to you" is to have a partner, a companion, a participant through every day of your pilgrimage. The remarkable thing about the old story about the covenant, is that its author, the one God, begins to emerge, in contrast to the jealous, angry, punishing, tyrant gods of the day, as a loving, patiently caring parent. This God ejects Adam and Eve from their garden paradise, but knits them clothes to keep them warm. This God sends judgment on the earth, and then remembers and tucks Noah and his family into the ark. And here, with Abraham and Sarah, this loving God comes to an old couple who had given up on the future, which is what barrenness means, and promises a baby. To have this God, to trust this God, is to know that particularly when the going is tough, when all the doors seem to be closing, when the future appears bleak, and the only meaning left to one is in the long gone past, God may be counted on to be present with dynamic and creative possibilities. To be in covenant with this God is to know that there is no darkness, no aloneness, no failure, no hopelessness so utter that it cuts us off from the source of new life.

I would submit that at a level in us far more profound than that place where we need to win and succeed and excel, we need that. Voltaire, certainly no friend of religion, as a cynical explanation of humankind's notorious religiosity, once said, "If there were no God, it would be necessary to invent him." That is closer to essential truth than Voltaire intended. We are created with an emptiness, a loneliness, and incompleteness satisfied only by the living God. The fact of our need always suggests, prior to our philosophizing, the existence of the one to whom the need points.

A veteran newspaper man commented recently: "Even people who say they are agnostics seem to spend a lot of emotional energy trying to satisfy themselves why they shouldn't believe." (Joe Berger, in Context, 3/1/85, p. 5)

Near the end of Heller's book, David is approaching the end of his life. The closest he ever comes to an affirmation of faith occurs in the middle of another argument. It is the best he can do. It is, perhaps, the best many of us can do. But, because of the grace and goodness of God's covenant, with us, it is enough.

David says:

"A Great nation, God promised. To me he would not give the time of day. He made my baby die. How could I ever forget? Nathan told me He would. I still have not forgiven Him for that, although I...need my God now more than ever before, and miss Him more than I would care to let Him know...I do not believe He has forgotten me." (p. 280)

It is the oldest and deepest and best of all news: that we are children of a covenant: that God will be God to us: that God has not forgotten and will not forget us - ever.

Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations forever and ever. Amen.